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And the GOP-dominated Senate Intelligence Committee failed to challenge CIA Director Michael V. Hayden when he gave superficial answers during his confirmation hearings last May. The struggle against Islamic terrorism requires intelligence that is not corrupted by politics. Senators should ask Gates questions designed to ensure that the intelligence the nation's leaders will use to make tactical and strategic decisions be as untainted as possible.

How, for instance, does he plan to reassure military and civilian intelligence collectors and analysts in the Defense Department that their findings will be welcomed, even when they disagree with his own conclusions? How will he discourage the common practice of "stovepiping," by which officials pass on — or retrieve — raw intelligence and use it without subjecting it to sufficient scrutiny? What will he do to minimize bureaucratic duplication and competition among the various defense intelligence agencies, the CIA and the National Security Agency? What lessons from intelligence failures and successes of Iraq could he bring to the Pentagon, and how?

Senators might also ask Gates about reports of a unit sounding extraordinarily similar to the one accused of manipulating the intelligence on Iran. Has been set up inside the Pentagon to coordinate intelligence on Iran.

Gates has the requisite background for the job and the brains to do it well. Senators should press his answers to these and similar questions to test his fitness for office and his performance in the job he gets there.

to Caracas

effectiveness of his economic policies will be re-evaluated in a moot. And if he has his way, he may be in power for a lot longer than six more years; he has managed to push through a constitutional reform that sets term limits for Venezuela's president.

Not all the news was bad for the beleaguered nation, led by the middle and upper classes. In fact, it has reacted badly to Chavez's political moves, including an attempted coup in 2002. His moves only made Chavez stronger by allowing him to paint his opponents as undemocratic. Carefully conceding after the election results were clear, opposition candidate Manuel Velazquez has assured that the coalition he patched together will continue to be a political player.

The U.S. should also take the high road. President Bush, a.k.a. "the devil" in Chavez's lexicon, disappointed the Venezuelan leader by taking a win in stride. That means ratcheting down anti-Chavez rhetoric and U.S. support for the opposition. The point is not to play into Chavez's hands by portraying the U.S. as an intolerant he-

LETTERS

'Iraq will never be one country as it once was.'

ALI SHAHMIRI, San

Iraq: Where do we go from here?

Re "Whose war is it?" editorial, Dec. 3

It is becoming fashionable to blame the Iraqis for not being committed to saving their own country. Before rationalizing this catastrophic American failure, let's review. We preemptively invaded a sovereign nation without provocation; we dismantled their entire governmental and security infrastructure, and we unleashed the fury of long-standing sectarian hatred, among many other blunders. And now we're mad at them for not fixing it?

Whose war is it? It's George W. Bush's war, and like everything he has touched throughout his life, it will turn out badly. He opened Pandora's box when the first shot was fired. After four years of unparalleled incompetence, it is cruel to expect the Iraqis to close the lid.

M.J. JOHNSON
 San Luis Obispo

Your cogent analysis of how we got into the mess in Iraq is accompanied by garbled advice on what we should do now. I believe that as long as we are there, both sides will consider us the enemy.

Let Iraqis make a democratic decision about when we should leave, and then we should do as they wish. If they are intent on engaging in civil war, and even if they conclude that being ruled by a dictator is the only possible solution right now, there is nothing we can do about it. We must take care of our own needs because if we become a crippled nation, we will be of little benefit to the world. Iraq is not Al Qaeda, which we must confront elsewhere and in other ways.

LEROY MILLER
 West Hills

Iraq is fast reaching the inevitable point of no return. The country is not being run by the so-called Iraqi government or by the Americans but by militias. They've been preparing, and now, sensing the withdrawal of American troops, they are positioning themselves for an all-out civil war. Iraq will never be one country as it once was. As soon as the Americans leave, intense and historical resentment will unleash major bloodshed, and only after that will the new boundaries be drawn and three autonomous regions emerge: Shiite, Sunni and Kurd. Lesson learned: President Bush, please give up imposing your Westernized, Christianity-based vision of democracy in the Middle East, and don't repeat the same mistake in Iran.

the dishonesty, hubris and foolhardiness that got us there. As for days not costing us anything, let's not forget the billions of dollars spent each month and the undeniable loss of respect around the world.

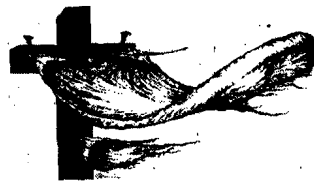
These problems (not to mention Iraqi civilian deaths) increase every day we stay in Iraq.

JOHN ASHEY
 Woodland Hills

I lost my father in Vietnam when I was a kindergartner in Pasadena, so obviously I have my personal concerns with issues of war and peace. Goldberg trivializes Iraq's human toll with the casual assurance of a person who has never known firsthand the pain of losing a loved one to a time and place of someone else's choosing. He appears impervious to the reluctant opinion shared by a growing majority of Americans that President Bush deliberately misled this country into initially supporting his whim.

Vietnam showed that we have neither a prolonged tolerance for incompetence nor the patience to suffer the fools who practice such as a matter of public policy. Sadly, that profound lesson has been ignored by the likes of Bush and Goldberg.

DONALD KOELPER
 Honolulu



NANCY ORHANIAN *Tribune Media Services*

Still angry at the church

Re "Church to settle with 45 accusers," Dec. 2

Thank you for placing in large, bold print L.A. Cardinal Roger Mahony's words: "We anticipate there will be further pain down the road for us." His use of the word "pain" to refer to the financial settlement of sexual abuse cases reveals how far he is from any understanding of what the victims suffered. Pain is what a 7-year-old girl feels when raped by a priest. Pain is what she and other children feel every day for the rest of their lives, trying to understand how an adult — in fact, a priest — could do this, how God could permit this, whether God exists and whether faith is possible in light of this terrible experience. Mahony's use of the word "pain" to describe his discomfort with having to make financial settlements 50 and 60 years later is despicable.

ANNE EGGBROTEN

church where the abusive priests worked is an excellent one. I would add that he instruct each parish priest to address his parishioners in the various commandments that the abusing priests brought. This would teach the priesthood and parishioners that priests are human and not above the law. It would teach potential victims that a degree of skepticism is justified when asked by priests for personal favors.

Mahony should review the Ten Commandments and his priests to do the same. Get back to the basics of love and respect that their God teaches.

CHUCK PA
 Granada

Inside the firehouse

Re "African American to run L.A. Fire Dept.," Dec. 4

I object to the headline of Monday's lead article announcing the imminent hiring of Douglas L. Barry to run the Los Angeles Fire Department. I do not write, "A 31-year veteran who ran the LAFD" or "Asst. fire chief chosen" or "Highly praised veteran to lead LAFD."

Of course his ethnicity is important, but having it as the first words in the headline places it as his most important attribute and even suggests that he was chosen because of his skin color. Experience, competence and management abilities are the most important part of the story when writing about the person who will oversee the fire department of the second-largest city in the United States.

HERBERT A. MED
 Los Angeles

Re "Firehouse culture an ordeal for women," Dec. 3

I'd say most normal people are mystified by the firehouse fiasco. While lawyers and politicians squabble over the details and psychological motives behind the decades-long behavior, it's obvious to any reasonable person that this is classism, fraternity or clique behavior that most people outgrow in life. Is it harassment, bonding, sexism, racism or a practical joke? Yes to all the above.

What's baffling is that the city engages in soul-searching again and again about how many millions of dollars it needs to pay for restitution. Has the city ever considered paying someone for jumping in bed of a female co-worker or shaving the genitals of a city worker while on the payroll? Who believes it will have a behavioral effect whatsoever, whether the current litigant gets \$2 million or \$4 million?